

Travels in Virginia in Revolutionary Times

By A. J. MORRISON.
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Journey of Isaac Weld—1796.
No. 10.

Isaac Weld, who spent about two years in this country, from 1795 to 1797, returned to Ireland "without entertaining the slightest wish to revisit the American continent." During his visit he saw a great deal, wrote a very good book after going home (an extraordinary book as the work of a very young man), and it is a matter of congratulation that he came. Weld was born in Dublin, of influential family connections, and had the advantage in his youth of an acquaintance with the Martiniques, those exceptionally intelligent people. Isaac Weld died in 1856. He had been for years vice-president of the Royal Dublin Society, and was famous as a topographer. Some account has already been given of his tour through the Northern Neck to Richmond. The observations continue:

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westerly direction towards the South-west or Green Mountains.

The first week in May had arrived; the trees had obtained a considerable part of their foliage, and the air in the woods was perfumed with the fragrant smell of numberless flowers and flowering shrubs. The music of the birds was also delightful. It is thought that in Virginia the singing birds are finer than what are to be met with on any other part of the continent, as the climate is more congenial to them. The notes of the mockingbird, or Virginian nightingale, are in particular most melodious. It is a remark, however, made by Catesby, and which appears to be a very just one, that the birds in America are much inferior to those in Europe in the melody of their notes, but that they are superior in point of plumage. I know of no American bird that has the rich, mellow note of our blackbird, the sprightly note of the skylark, or the sweet and plaintive note of the nightingale. After having listened to the mockingbird, there is no novelty in hearing the song of any other bird in the country; and indeed, their songs are, for the most part, but very simple in themselves, though combined they are pleasing.

The frogs in America, it must here be observed, make a most singular noise, some of them absolutely whistling, whilst others croak so loudly that it is difficult at times to tell whether the sound proceeds from a calf or a frog. I have more than once been deceived by the noise when walking in a meadow. These last frogs are called bullfrogs; they mostly keep in pairs, and are never found but where there is good water; their bodies are from four to seven inches long, and their legs are in proportion; they are extremely active, and take prodigious leaps.

The first town I reached on going towards the mountains was Columbia, or Point of Fork, as it is called in the neighborhood. It is situated about sixty miles above Richmond, at the confluence of the Rappahannock and Potomac Rivers, which united form James River. This is a flourishing little place, containing about forty houses, and a warehouse for the inspection of tobacco. On the neck of land between the two rivers, just opposite to the town, is the magazine of the State, in which are kept 12,000 stand of arms, and about thirty tons of powder. The low lands bordering upon the river in this neighborhood are extremely valuable.

From Columbia to the Green Springs, about twenty miles farther on, the road runs almost wholly through a pine forest, and is very lonely. Night came on before I got to the end of it, and, as very commonly happens with travelers in this part of the world, I soon lost my way. A light, seen through the trees, seemed to indicate that a house was not far off. My servant eagerly rode up to it, but the poor fellow's consternation was great indeed when he observed it moving from him, presently coming back, and then with swiftness departing again into the woods. I was at a loss for a time myself to account for the appearance. I found it proceeded from the fire fly. As the summer came on these flies appeared every night. After a light shower in the afternoon I have seen the woods sparkling with them in every quarter.

After wandering about till it was near 11 o'clock, a plantation at last appeared, and having got fresh information respecting the road from the negroes in the quarters, who generally sit up half the night, and over a fire in all seasons, I again set out for the Green Springs. With some difficulty I at last found the way, and arrived there about midnight. The place is a most beautiful one, and the people at the tavern were very unwilling to open their doors. Besides the tavern and the quarters of the slaves, there is but one more building at this place. This is a large farmhouse, where people that resort to the springs are accommodated with lodgings about as good as those at the tavern. The springs are just on the margin of the wood at the bottom of a slope which begins at the houses, and are covered with a few boards merely, to keep the leaves from falling in. The waters are chalybeate, and are drunk chiefly by persons from the low country, whose constitutions have been relaxed by the heats of summer.

Having breakfasted in the morning at this place, I proceeded on my journey up the Southwest Mountain. In the course of the day's ride I observed a great number of snakes, which were now beginning to come forth from their holes. I killed a black one that I found sleeping, stretched across the road. It was long, thin, and black; the black snake is more commonly met with than any other in this part of America. It is wonderfully fond of milk, and is frequently found in the dairies, which in Virginia are for the most part in low situations like cellars.

The Southwest Mountains run nearly parallel to the Blue Ridge, and are the first which you come to on going up the country from the sea coast in Virginia. The soil here changes to a deep argillaceous earth, particularly well suited to the culture of small grain and clover, and produces abundant crops. As this earth, however, does not absorb the water very quickly the farmer is exposed to great losses from heavy falls of rain. On the sides of the mountain, where the ground has been worn out with the culture of tobacco, and the water has been suffered to run in the same channel for a length of time, it is surprising to see the depth of the ravines, or gullies, as they are called. However, the country in the neighborhood of these mountains is far more populous than that which lies towards Richmond; and there are many persons that even consider it to be the garden of the United States. The salubrity of the climate is equal also to that of any part of the United States; and the inhabitants have in consequence a healthy, ruddy appearance. The people appeared to me to be of a more frank and open disposition, more inclined to hospitality, and to live more contentedly on what they possess than the people of the same class in any other part of the United States.

Along these mountains live several gentlemen of large landed property, who farm their own estates, as in the lower parts of Virginia; among the number is Mr. Jefferson. His house is at present in an unfinished state, but it carried on according to the

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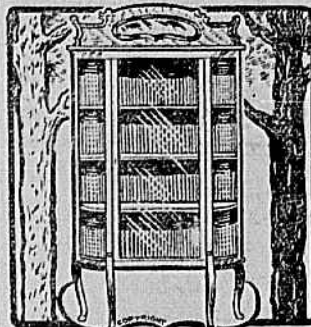
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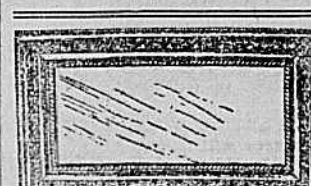
\$27.50
Buys a large mas-
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\$33.50 Buys This \$45.00 Solid Oak Bedroom Suit.

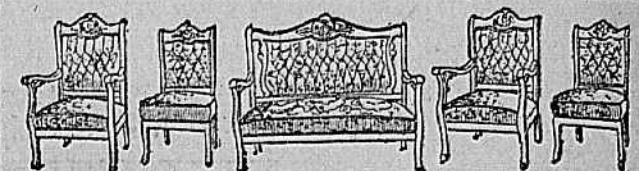
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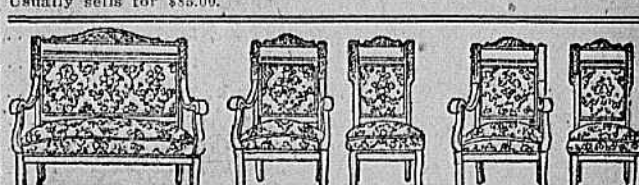


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plan laid down, it will be one of the most elegant private habitations in the United States. Several attempts have been made in this neighborhood to bring the manufacture of wine to perfection; none of them, however, have succeeded to the wish of the parties. A set of gentlemen once went to the expense even of getting six Italians over for the purpose. We must not, however, conclude that good wine can never be manufactured upon these mountains. It will require some time, and different experiments, to ascertain the particular kind of wine, and the mode of cultivating it best adapted to the soil of these mountains. Having crossed the Southwest Mountains, I passed along to Lynchburg, a town situated on the south side of Rappahannock. This town contains about 100 houses, and a warehouse for the inspection of tobacco, where about 2,000 hogsheds are annually inspected. It has been built entirely within the last fifteen years, and is rapidly increasing from its advantageous situation for carrying on trade with the adjacent country. The boats, in which the produce is conveyed down the river, are from forty-eight to fifty-four feet long, but very narrow in proportion to their breadth. Three men are sufficient to navigate one of these boats, and they can go to Richmond and back again in ten days. They fall down with the stream, but work their way back again with poles. The cargo carried in these boats is always proportioned to the depth of water in the river, which varies very much. Along the banks I observed great quantities of weeds hanging upon the trees considerably above my head, though on horseback. A few miles from Lynchburg, towards the Blue Mountains, is a small town called New London, in which there is a magazine and also an armory, erected during the war. About fifteen men were here employed. As I passed through, repairing old arms and furnishing up others. At one end of the room lay the muskets, to the amount of about 5,000, all together in a large heap, and at the opposite end lay a pile of leather accoutrements, absolutely rotting for want of common attention. All the armories throughout the United States are kept much in the same style.

Between this place and the Blue Mountains the country is rough and hilly, and but very thinly inhabited. The few inhabitants, however, met with here are uncommonly robust and tall; it is rare to see a man amongst them who is not six feet high. These people entertain a high opinion of their own superiority in point of bodily strength over the inhabitants of the low country. A small race of men is found all along the Blue Mountains. Beyond the Blue Ridge, after crossing by this route near the Peaks of Otter, I met with but very few settlements till I drew near to Fincastle, in Botetourt county. This town was only begun about the year 1799, yet it

already contains sixty houses, and is most rapidly increasing. The improvement of the adjacent country has likewise been very rapid, and land now bears nearly the same price that it does in the neighborhood of York and Lancaster, in Pennsylvania. The inhabitants consist principally of Germans, who have extended their settlements from Pennsylvania along the whole of that rich tract of land which runs through the upper part of Maryland, and from thence behind the Blue Mountains to the most southern part of Virginia. They have many times, I am told, crossed the Blue Ridge to examine the land, but the red soil which they found there was different from what they had been accustomed to.

The difference indeed between the country on the eastern and on the western side of the Blue Ridge, in Botetourt county, is astonishing, when it is considered that both are under the same latitude, and that this difference is perceptible within the short distance of thirty miles. On the eastern side of the Ridge, cotton grows extremely well; and in winter snow scarcely ever remains upon the ground more than a day or two at a time. On the other side cotton never comes to perfection, and in every farmyard you see sleighs or sledges. On the eastern side of the Blue Ridge, in Virginia, not one of these carriages is to be met with.

Another circumstance may also be mentioned (besides the contrast in the soils) as making a material difference between the country on one side of the Blue Ridge and that on the other, namely, that behind the mountains the weevil is unknown. In the lower parts of Virginia, and the other States where the weevil is common, they always thresh out the grain as soon as the crops are brought in, and leave it in the chaff, which creates a degree of heat sufficient to destroy the insect. According to the general opinion, the weevil originated on the eastern shore of Maryland, where a person, in expectation of a great rise in the price of wheat, kept over all his crops for the space of six years, when they were found full of these insects. For a considerable time the Potomack River formed a barrier to their progress. The Blue Mountains at present serve as a barrier, and secure the country to the westward from their depredations.

Botetourt county is entirely surrounded by mountains. The climate is particularly agreeable. It appears to me that there is no part of America where the climate would be more congenial to the constitution of a native of Great Britain or Ireland. In the western part of the county are several medicinal springs, where numbers of people resort towards the latter end of summer. These most frequented are called the Sweet Springs. A set of gentlemen from South Carolina have, I understand, since I was there, purchased the place and are going to erect several commodious dwellings in the neighborhood.

The country immediately behind the

Blue Mountains, between Botetourt county and the Potomack River, is agreeably diversified with hill and dale, and abounds with extensive tracts of rich land. The natural herbage is not so fine here as in Botetourt county, but when clover is once sown it grows most luxuriantly; wheat also is produced in as plentiful crops as in any part of the United States. Tobacco is not raised excepting for private use, and but little Indian corn is sown, as it is liable to be injured by the nightly frosts, which are common in the spring. The whole of this country to the west of the mountains is increasing most rapidly in population. In the neighborhood of Winchester it is so thickly settled that wood is now beginning to be thought valuable.

As I passed along the road from Fincastle to the Potomack, which is the high road from the Northern States to Kentucky, I met with great numbers of people from Kentucky and the new State of Tennessee going towards Philadelphia and Baltimore, and with many others going in a contrary direction "to explore," as they call it, that is to search for lands. Great numbers of people from Kentucky and the new State of Tennessee are now beginning to travel on horseback, with pistols or swords, and a large blanket folded up under their saddle. There are now

houses scattered along nearly the whole way from Fincastle to Lexington, in Kentucky. It would be still dangerous for any person to venture singly, but if five or six travel together they are perfectly secure. Formerly travelers were always obliged to go forty or fifty in a party.

The first town you come to, going northward from Botetourt county, is Lexington, a neat little place that did contain about 100 houses, a courthouse and gaol, but the greater part of it was destroyed by fire just before I got there. Thirty miles further on stands Staunton. This town carries on a considerable trade with the back country, and contains nearly 200 dwellings, mostly built of stone, together with a church. Winchester stands 100 miles to the northward of Staunton, and is the largest town in the United States on the western side of the Blue Mountains. The houses are estimated at 350.

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